

Shane Prijatel-Spare

Sociological Analysis and Critique of the “Demographic Winter” Framing Strategy

Fertility rates are decreasing all over the world and in many western countries, they are below replacement fertility levels or rather the total fertility rate at which women give birth to enough babies to sustain population levels. Some political conservatives see this change as a major cause for concern and attribute the decline in population to the devastation of the world economy. These same individuals use this framing strategy to reinforce their conservative ideologies in their political and social movement. The term “Demographic Winter” refers to the reduction of birthrates, especially in the Western world, and the effects that the aging population will have on our future society. The “Demographic Winter” framing strategy is utilized by a group of conservative individuals who promote the “traditional” family argue against policies they consider “anti-family,” including abortion and contraceptives rights, gay marriage, welfare that supports single motherhood, laws that promote women’s independence, and comprehensive sexual education in schools. They claim that the declining population will eventually lead to economic destruction. Many of them also belong to an organization called the World Congress of Families. This organization represents and promotes a conservative ideology exemplified by their mission statement:

“We address ourselves to all people of good will who, with the majority of the world's people, value the natural family. Ideologies of statism, individualism and sexual revolution, today challenge the family's very legitimacy as an institution. Associated with this challenge are the problems of divorce, devaluation of parenting, declining family time, morally relativistic public education, confusions over sexual identity, promiscuity, sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, poverty, human trafficking, violence against women, child abuse, isolation of the elderly, excessive taxation and below-replacement fertility. To defend the family and to guide public policy and cultural norms, this Declaration asserts principles that respect and uphold the vital roles that the family plays in society.”ⁱ

This model, although very family oriented, also includes a conservative rhetoric that promotes individual progress and achievement. Thus, there is a contradiction between the promotion of the family and the criticism of government support of families. The leaders of this ideological movement want to create a family-based economic system. However, their analysis lacks a serious consideration of the structural effects of race, class, and gender inequality.

The WCF members I examine in this paper frame population decline as a destructive factor and hope to promote a change in the current “liberal ideologies” that they claim are plaguing the world. They argue for cultural shift in the way individuals think about sexual reproduction, which will include an increase in the emphasis on religion and the “traditional family.” They also advocate the banning of gay marriage and legalized abortion as well as the promotion of marriage through new tax structures and social welfare programs. Based on my analysis, I argue that the “demographic winter” framework and the solutions offered to address falling birthrates ignore racial, class, and gender inequality and are based on a perspective that privileges the experiences of white, affluent, Western men. In this paper, I analyze and critique the use of the “Demographic Winter” framing strategy using a sociological perspective that examines the structural effects of race, class and gender.

My data includes a number of speeches taken from the World Congress of Families that have been presented at their international conventions throughout the world. The speakers I examine all discuss “demographic winter.” To identify which individuals discussed this framework, I first found all of the speakers from the United States because I am interested in the conception of the demographic winter in the context of the US, and isolated those that referenced the demographic winter in their speeches. To do so, I identified key words such as “demographic winter,” “fertility,” “replacement levels” in the speeches. After identifying these individuals, I

examined their websites and other publications. All speakers quoted in this paper are major players in the “demographic winter” ideological movement.

According to Don Feder, a media consultant, writer and the Communications Director of the World Congress of Families, “The term ‘nuclear winter,’ popularized in the 1980s, alluded to the catastrophic environmental impact of a nuclear war. The long-term consequences of demographic winter could be equally devastating.”ⁱⁱ This conception attempts to catastrophize the declining birthrates in the world, creating an image of imminent devastation with individuals like Phillip Longman, an American demographer and a Schwartz Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation (a non-profit, nonpartisan public policy institute), saying that “the ongoing global decline in human birthrates is the single most powerful force affecting the fate of nations and the future of society in the 21st century.”ⁱⁱⁱ This view blames world population decline in the Western World for the economic and social problems. These problems emphasize the aging population that must be taken care of as well as the future economic decline due to a lack of employable workers. They argue that these problems could all be solved through an increase in birthrates. All of these issues also only relate to Western societies because many other non-western countries are still experiencing growth. However, many of the proponents of this idea believe that this population growth will decrease and eventually start declining over time.

These individuals also believe that abortions are one of the primary causes of the declining birthrates. According to Don Feder, “In Russia each year, there are more abortions than live births. The Russian people are literally aborting their future.”^{iv} This statement indicates that countries like Russia are destroying their future based on their high numbers of abortions and that other countries may also experience this same problem. This statement uses the fear of

abortion to promote the imminent doom of the demographic winter framing theory and bolsters the arguments of declining birthrates by using empirical examples.

This framing strategy claims that modern-day cultural norms like the increase in women's freedoms and the sexual liberation have caused damage to the "traditional" family and have been detrimental to the future and current prosperity of society. They claim that the liberalization of social policies on abortion and contraception damages the "natural" or "traditional" familial structure of society—a mother inside the home, a working father as well as a large number of children. According to David Hartman, an economist, banker and Chairman of the Institute for Budget and Tax Limitations, these policies "have probably had the most, if unquantifiable, *direct* contribution to the decline in fertility in the "developed nations."^v They claim that social welfare policies, which include "extortionate increases in the burden of taxation upon families, and perverse effects of the welfare expenditures which these taxes funded"^{vi} have also had negative long-lasting effects on the "traditional" family. According to Hartman, these policies have caused "more unwed motherhood," which he claims is "a difficult and socially inefficient (and socially unacceptable) basis for raising children."^{vii} Hartman as well as other actors that support this idea like Longman and Feder claim that these policies and ideas also promote an "anti-family rhetoric"—perceived threats to "the family"—including discussions of sexual freedom, cohabitation, single motherhood, and anything that prevents the growth of the "traditional" family. This is common theme discussed by the individuals highlighted in this paper.

A significant portion of my data is drawn from the 2008 film, *Demographic Winter*, in which these fears are discussed and analyzed by several conservative writers, academics and politicians. Steven Smoot, the president of Family First Foundation (an organization that is

partnered with WCF) produced this film. The speakers of this film all share similar ideologies focused on the fear of falling birthrates and the declining population. This film acts as a forum for those individuals to discuss their thoughts on this perceived threat to society and criticizes population control policies. The goal of the film is clearly to create a sense of fear and urgency, ultimately leading to a change in cultural values and social policy.

The film argues that the population decline is having a detrimental affect on the institution of the family. There are several dramatized scenes of familial discord. In one scene, a child sits crying while her parents fight, representing the hectic nature of life when both parents are employed. This scene advocates a return to a time in which women did not spend time out of the home. Struggling families are also portrayed in the scene in which a man is playing video games and a woman stands near him with a sad expression on her face. This again relates to the divorce culture that they believe has been created. They argue that couples do not have enough time for each other due to material obsession and a change in family dynamics, resulting in a hectic schedule that does not permit families to have time together. They also promote a sense of individualism in which parents focus on themselves, forgetting their children in the process. Throughout the film, children literally disappear from see-saws, swings, and classrooms to represent the decline in birthrates. In one scene, two happy parents are standing with their four children and three of them disappear, alluding to the diminishing family. The film argues that due to the changes of family life including a more hectic work schedule, mothers being outside of the home, an increase in divorce rates as well as longer amounts of time being spent at university and in education, people are having less and less children.

In the following section, I offer a sociological analysis and critique of the “demographic winter” framework. Viewing the demographic winter framework through a sociological lens

necessitates an examination of how these movement leaders engage with or ignore factors of race, class and gender.

RACE

Proponents of the “demographic winter” framework rarely discuss race explicitly. However, there are many racially coded phrases in the film *Demographic Winter* as well as in the speeches and discussions of members of the WCF. These racially coded phrases act to promote the white, western population while reducing the value of the children in the Third World. I attempt to identify this devaluation as well as the other discussions of race through immigration, focusing on conceptions of fertility decline.

For example, the narrator of the film asserts that “60% of the US populations’ growth since 1990 has come from immigrants and their children, mostly Hispanic immigrants.”^{viii} Linda Waite, professor of Urban Sociology at the University of Chicago, then explains that Mexican immigrants are the *only* reason the United States has remained at or near replacement level fertility rates and this is considered problematic. The “native” population, the film explains, is declining at a dangerous rate. The fact that the two fertility rates are separated shows that immigrants and their children are not seen as true Americans and are seemingly not considered valued contributions to the United States population.

The discussions of the fears of the population implosion are all targeted at the Western world. Although Third-World countries have higher birthrates, their children are not seen as an answer to worldwide population decline because their countries are less developed. Their children are less valuable under this ideology. Gary Becker, an American economist professor at the University of Chicago, states:

“Human capital refers to skills, knowledge and information that people have. Modern economies are based on information and knowledge, not physical strength but mental command of different types of information and skills so it’s the foundation of modern economies. Any economy that doesn’t have substantial investments in people’s human capital won’t be able to become a modern or a rich economy”.^{ix}

This statement is made after pictures of African and Indian children are shown, indicating the underdevelopment and lessened value of those non-Western, non-industrialized countries.

Although many of the authors do not explicitly examine race, their continual references to the Third World, the European and Western world as well as the declining demographics of “developed” nations, indicates that the white, Western family is more valuable than the non-white, non-Western family. There is a bias against the Third World and a fear that these countries will become the dominant force in the world. Many of these individuals believe that the Third World presents a threat to world peace. This fear is further emphasized by Mark Regnerus, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He states that “the most intelligent people in the world are not interested in reproducing”^x, resulting in white, western families having no children at all. There is an implication that the lesser Third World families are having children which is a problem for society. They represent a racial threat that could cause a diminishing of society, or rather of the European culture. The individuals that discuss the demographic winter use racial coding to express their fears, creating a sense of urgency for reproduction amongst the European population.

CLASS

The “Demographic Winter” framework ignores class inequality in its diagnosis of the problem and its offered solutions. These solutions are individualistic as well as class based. The individuals that discuss “Demographic Winter” emphasize the benefits of individual success

while disregarding the necessity of social welfare policies that support all families. For example, David Hartman advocates:

“[Conversion of] old-age pension and health care schemes to individualized and family savings accounts under the direction and ownership of each family and control of their own welfare.”... “[Ending of] welfare schemes that subsidize unwed motherhood and the improvidence of the older generation at the expense of young families, and end the country’s trade and fiscal deficits that mortgage our future.”^{xi}

In other words, he advocates ending social security, Medicare and Medicaid, food stamps, and support for low-income families in order to encourage growth in family size.

In his speech “How Do Nations Choose ‘Demographic Winter’? Is America Doing So?” John Mueller, economist and Director of the Economics and Ethics Program of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, advocates tax cuts, social welfare, and Social Security reform as well as the ending of legal abortions in order to encourage fertility rates. According to Mueller, taxes, social welfare and social security must all be reformed and balanced based on individual taxes and investment so that the amount that families put into the system will equal the amount that they get out. This would relieve the economic burden on families and require each family to invest in their own futures and pay taxes based on their own incomes, which he argues would cause an increase in birthrates due to the reduction of taxes being paid. Mueller also believes that by outlawing abortion, the United States could “avoid a declining population and an unbalanced social insurance system.”^{xii} Thus, by stopping the decline of the population, the current social insurance system would become balanced once again and create a new, prosperous environment for parents and their children.

These concepts all promote an individualist class-based form of governing that does not take into account the social realities of families or mothers that are seeking help. These proposed policies do not provide the necessary aid that poor families require and are only beneficial to

families or mothers that can already support themselves. An increase in fertility rates as well as a return to the traditional family may be impossible with these class specific policies because they do not extend to the people that most require these services. The “pro-family” policies regarding welfare and the family may actually be a hindrance to the creation of a sustainable society.

GENDER

The WCF worldview emphasizes a male dominated society in which males work while females stay at home and tend to children. This is discussed many times by proponents like David Hartman who suggests that women should be encouraged “to prefer child rearing to employment, and men to welcome the challenge of primary provider for the family.”^{xiii}

A woman’s right to an abortion is a major cause for concern under this worldview because it gives her the ability to decide whether and when she wants to have children. According to this conception, women gain the ability to deny their duties of natural motherhood, which can result in a reduction in birthrates. The proponents of this idea see this choice to deny motherhood as selfish. This conception is reinforced by Don Feder in his speech “The Philosophical Roots of the Demographic winter” in which he states:

“In the United States today, there are cases of teen-aged girls having abortions because pregnancy would spoil the lines of their prom dress.”^{xiv}

In this statement, Feder asserts that women are having numerous abortions based on reasons that can become extremely trivial. He is promoting a perspective that disregards the economic and social burdens that may cause women to get abortions.

These perspectives are male oriented and do not discuss why women are having so many abortions. Women’s economic burdens and familial situations have a much greater impact on their fertility than the supporters of the demographic winter framework acknowledge.

The film's speakers blame the sexual revolution and birth control for the destruction of the population. Don Feder in his speech, "The Philosophical Roots of Demographic Winter", blames the sexual revolution for causing a decline in marriage and thus a decline in birthrates saying:

"Once and for all, sex was divorced from marriage, commitment and morality. We've seen the initiation of sexual activity at an earlier and earlier age. Sex before marriage led to sex outside marriage, which led to multiple liaisons, divorce and what's been called serial polygamy."^{xv}

This statement defines the sexual revolution as a cause for promiscuity resulting in a decline in marriages as well as birthrates. This problem, according to Feder, has been further damaged by cohabitation. He states that: "Given the impermanence of their relationship, cohabitating couples are more likely to be childless, or to have fewer children."^{xvi} In this sense, cohabitation results in a gender inequality because women in these situations are having fewer and fewer children. Although it is not explicitly stated, there is an emphasis on women's bodies and their lack of children, ignoring the men that are involved in these relationships.

The narrator also blames women for their increased use of the birth control pill: "The biggest impact on fertility from the pill, was from eliminating pregnancies' from 70% of married women."^{xvii} There is no discussion of the increase in the use of male contraceptives and its reduction in pregnancy rates. This argument centers the problem on women's bodies and their abandonment of their duty as mothers.

These examples all have a male oriented perspective. There are very few women promoting the "demographic winter" perspective. The men who are leading this charge, view women mainly as bearers of children and homemakers, but also as the culprits of population decline due to their continual and selfish use of birth control and abortions. Under this ideology,

women have the ability and the responsibility to change the future, but they should do so through motherhood, marriage and birth rather than through women's independent advancement.

The "Demographic Winter" framing strategy is a well-constructed tool of conservative political ideology meant to encourage people to have more children and promote pro-natalist policies worldwide. They hope to elicit shame into individuals—mainly white Westerners—for not fulfilling their duty as parents and incite a fear of a Third World takeover. They claim that the increase in women's employment, the sexual revolution, the divorce revolution have caused the decrease in fertility rates. According to WCF members, prosperity represents the final piece in this fertility reduction because our hectic lifestyles and increase in education have caused a reduction in birthrates. Prosperity, thus, relates to the problems that come with modernization and development. One of the main way to solve this problem is through an application of individualistic economic policies that include a reformation of social security, welfare and taxes, as well as an increase in tax aid to families rather than single mothers. The second aspect of this process involves a restructuring of social policy which includes the ending of legalized abortion and same-sex marriage. This has been discussed in numerous forums that include speeches, publications and films like *Demographic Winter* in the hopes that Americans will view this as a cause for concern. In this paper, I have applied a sociological analysis and critique to these frameworks and proposed solutions, taking into account dimensions of race, class and gender inequality.

ⁱ World Congress of Families

<http://worldcongress.org/about/purpose>

ⁱⁱ Interview

http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/demographic_winter

ⁱⁱⁱ *Falling Human Fertility and the Future of the Family*

<http://worldcongress.org/wcf4.spkrs/wcf4.longman.htm>

^{iv} *The Philosophical Roots of Demographic Winter*

<http://worldcongress.org/wcf5.spkrs/wcf5.feder.htm>

^v *Diagnosing the Impending European Population Implosion*

http://worldcongress.org/wcf3_spkrs/wcf3_hartman.htm

^{vi} *Diagnosing the Impending European Population Implosion*

http://worldcongress.org/wcf3_spkrs/wcf3_hartman.htm

^{vii} *Diagnosing the Impending European Population Implosion*

http://worldcongress.org/wcf3_spkrs/wcf3_hartman.htm

^{viii} Demographic Winter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZeyYIsGdAA>

^{ix} *Diagnosing the Impending European Population Implosion*

http://worldcongress.org/wcf3_spkrs/wcf3_hartman.htm

^x Demographic Winter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZeyYIsGdAA>

^{xi} *Diagnosing the Impending European Population Implosion*

http://worldcongress.org/wcf3_spkrs/wcf3_hartman.htm

^{xii} *How do Nations Choose “Demographic Winter”? Is America Doing So?*

<http://worldcongress.org/wcf5.spkrs/wcf5.mueller.htm>

^{xiii}

^{xiv} *The Philosophical Roots of Demographic Winter*

<http://worldcongress.org/wcf5.spkrs/wcf5.feder.htm>

^{xv} *The Philosophical Roots of Demographic Winter*

<http://worldcongress.org/wcf5.spkrs/wcf5.feder.htm>

^{xvi} *The Philosophical Roots of Demographic Winter*

<http://worldcongress.org/wcf5.spkrs/wcf5.feder.htm>

^{xvii} Demographic Winter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZeyYIsGdAA>